

*From Obligation to Opportunity*

# Teacher Supervision

*That Improves*

# Student Learning

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**In Washington State, as in most of the country, teacher evaluation processes are changing dramatically.**

**T**he focus of the supervisory process is shifting: from fulfilling contractual obligations to promoting opportunities for growth; from using data to prove to using data to improve, from evaluation as an event to evaluation as a process, and from teachers asking “what are my scores?” to asking “what are my goals?”

Much of the impetus for these initiatives stems from a fundamental premise: Teacher effectiveness links directly to student learning and skillful supervision links directly to teacher effectiveness. In well-implemented evaluation systems, the difference between highly rated teachers and those scoring at the lower ends of performance scales can be an entire year’s worth of additional learning for students.

Such evaluation systems include: clearly articulated and well-understood stan-

dards and related performance scales, high-levels of supervisor observation and analysis skills, and both formative and summative conferences aimed at teacher development, not remediation.

Recent studies suggest that even when the first two factors are in place, confidence and competence in learning-focused supervisory conferences make a fundamental difference in teacher growth.

Thus, for supervisors, the ability to structure and facilitate powerful learning-focused conversations lies at the heart of both one-to-one and collective work with teachers. Standards provide the what to talk about; learning-focused supervision offers the how.

Learning-focused supervision is a growth-oriented process that embeds four essential qualities. This approach to building professional expertise is developmental, standards-driven, data-based and customized.

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Principal Peter Donaldson observes a class at Mount Erie Elementary (Anacortes SD).



## Developmental

Learning is a developmental process, for children and adults alike. In teaching, as in all fields, there is a definable novice to expert journey. Rubrics describing performance levels illuminate this pathway. As student demographics shift, as technology infuses classrooms and expectations for higher levels of understanding drive changes in assessment systems, all teachers will be on a developmental trajectory no matter how many years of experience they have. Learning-focused supervisors take a growth-oriented approach—shaping their interactions based on both a teacher's present practices and shared expectations for future practices.

## Standards-driven

Standards frame shared expectations and establish and clarify measures of excellence for teacher and student performance. Applied effectively, they become rallying points for important conversations about teaching and

learning and they set aspirations for goal setting and continuous growth. In learning-focused cultures, standards not only shape expectations—they raise them. Deeply researched and validated teaching standards with their associated rubrics now define and describe good teaching. Excellence is a measurable destination, not a vague aspiration or locally developed checklist.

## Data-based

Productive supervisory interactions are grounded in a variety of data that capture the effects and outcomes of a teacher's practice. Literal notes, student work products and other forms of objective data focus supervisory conversations on tangible evidence that become a catalyst for exploration and analysis. Without accurate information, conversations drift in a sea of inference and distraction. Clear data establish the

foundation for calibrating performance against standards, stimulating goal setting and the clarification of desirable actions and measureable results.

## Customized

Growth-promoting supervisors customize their work with teachers. The classroom practices of two teachers with similar overall ratings

might be vastly different. By clarifying and contextualizing specific elements and discrete components within standards, learning-focused supervisors and teachers can explore fine-grained vari-

ation in skills. During planning and reflecting conversations, skillful supervisors clarify expectations using examples based on the teaching assignment, grade level or content area. These supervisors flexibly apply templates and tools to personalize their approach and build professional expertise for individual teachers.

Standards provide the *what* to talk about; learning-focused supervision offers the *how*.

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## A Continuum of Learning-focused Interaction

Learning-focused supervision is a partnership in which evaluator and teacher construct new understandings based on contextualized data, relevant research and explicit standards reflecting principals of effective practice. These constructs support goal setting, problem solving and action planning.

To keep supervisory conversations learning-focused, skillful supervisors shift between four stances: calibrating, consulting, collaborating, and coaching to develop teachers' capacities to reflect upon data, to generate ideas and options, and to increase personal and professional awareness and skills. Each stance serves a specific function and all are effective tools for rich conversations.

## Learning-focused Conversations: The Continuum of Interaction

Supervisor/ Specialist	Information, analysis, goals		Information, analysis, goals		Teacher
	Calibrating	Consulting	Collaborating	Coaching	
<b>Guiding question</b>	What are the gaps/ growth areas indicated for this teacher based on present performance levels and the standards?	What information, ideas and technical resources will be most useful to this teacher at this time?	What are some ways to balance my contributions with this teacher's experiences and expertise?	What mental and emotional resources might be most useful for this teacher at this time?	
<b>Function</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Articulating standards</li> <li>• Using data to identify gaps between expected standards and present results</li> <li>• Defining problems</li> <li>• Prescribing results</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarifying standards</li> <li>• Using data to analyze gaps between expected standards and present results</li> <li>• Offering information and ideas</li> <li>• Providing problem analysis and perspectives</li> <li>• Naming principles of practice.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jointly clarifying standards</li> <li>• Using data to co-analyze gaps between expected standards and present results</li> <li>• Co-generating information and ideas</li> <li>• Co-analyzing problems</li> <li>• Expanding perspectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Referencing standards as a focal point</li> <li>• Using data to explore gaps between expected standards and present results</li> <li>• Facilitating teacher idea production</li> <li>• Mediating teacher problem-framing and analysis</li> <li>• Enhancing teacher capacities for planning, reflecting, problem-solving and decision making</li> </ul>	
<b>Role in planning for action</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determining teacher actions/goals</li> <li>• Naming success criteria</li> <li>• Establishing timelines</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proposing teacher actions/goals</li> <li>• Defining success criteria</li> <li>• Confirming timelines</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-constructing teacher actions/goals</li> <li>• Co-developing success criteria</li> <li>• Agreeing on timelines</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exploring teacher actions/goals</li> <li>• Eliciting success criteria</li> <li>• Clarifying timelines</li> </ul>	
<b>Cues</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Credible voice</li> <li>• Using neutral language, as in  <i>"These data ..."</i>  <i>"This example ..."</i> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Credible voice</li> <li>• Using neutral language or personal pronouns, as in,  <i>"I think that ..."</i>  <i>"It is important to ..."</i>  <i>"Here is one way to think about that"</i> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approachable voice</li> <li>• Collective pronouns, as in  <i>"Let's think about ..."</i>  <i>"How might we ..."</i> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approachable voice</li> <li>• Second person pronouns, as in  <i>"What are some of your ...?"</i>  <i>"How might you ...?"</i> </li> </ul>	
<b>Cautions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take care not to let personal preferences become prescriptions. Judgments must be supported by clear, external criteria.</li> <li>• Use literal observation notes, classroom artifacts and assessment data to avoid subjectivity or bias.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitor and manage the impulse to help or rescue. Stay learning-focused and don't let personal passion overcome patience with the developmental process.</li> <li>• Be aware that overuse of the consulting stance may build dependency on the supervisor for problem solving.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resist the impulse to dominate the conversation and provide the bulk of the analysis and thinking.</li> <li>• Monitor for balance in idea production. Don't allow personal enthusiasm or preferences to override the intention to co-create ideas and options.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce potential frustration by posing developmentally appropriate questions. Questions should stretch not strain thinking.</li> <li>• Be sure that questions allow for multiple responses and do not signal that there is a preferred answer.</li> </ul>	

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As the table on page 11 illustrates, each stance is defined by who is the primary source of determining the data-based, standards-driven level of performance, who provides technical information, problem definition and gap analysis, and who identifies and establishes growth goals and action plans.

Application of the Continuum is not static. Skilled supervisors fluently and flexibly navigate across all four stances. Just as in teaching, it is important to know and be able to select from a variety of strategies that are appropriate to the learner's needs. In this way, the Continuum helps keep learning-focused supervision both developmental and customized. The ultimate aim of these stances and their cumulative effect is to support continuous learning for teachers and to enhance their capacity to reflect upon and learn from their own practice and to contribute to productive collegial relationships.

## Calibrating Stance

Guiding question for the supervisor: "What are the gaps/growth areas indicated for this teacher based on present performance levels and the standards?"

In the calibrating stance, the supervisor clarifies performance standards and expectations, identifies gaps, and names and monitors improvement goals and success indicators. For the supervisor, this stance is used to connect observational and other data to a performance level with confidence, clarity and credibility.

Because it is most desirable for the teacher to make these assessments, using the calibrating stance is limited to occasions when a directive approach is called for – generally for very low-performing or unsatisfactory teachers or sometimes for "complacent" teachers who need motivation.

It is important to note that the act of calibration, or assessing the level of practice based on a standard must



A teacher at Davis High School (Yakima SD) demonstrates a problem on the board.

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occur in every evaluative conversation. This determination requires clear standards, a rubric delineating levels of performance based on those standards and literal data to determine the "fit."

In the calibrating stance, the supervisor determines and communicates the level of performance to the teacher. Based on a variety of data sources the supervisor establishes a level of performance and organizes the data and the conversation to inform and discuss this rating with the teacher, clearly explaining the thinking behind the assessment as it relates to all of the information available.

In the most extreme cases, the calibrating stance becomes the dominant stance in the conversation, with the greater percentage of time spent there. Some triggers for this choice include: teaching behaviors that create an unsafe or harmful environment physically or emotionally, teacher responses that are inappropriate, classroom management that is non-existent, student performance that is consistently below expectations and instructional planning and delivery that is ineffective.

## Supervisory Functions

In the calibrating stance, the supervisor defines and reinforces teaching standards and expectations. The verb to calibrate means an active process of matching an object or performance to an agreed upon value. Simplistically, that value might be a shoe size or the diameter of a section of tubing. In contemporary educational discourse such values are expressed as standards. To operate with integrity within a calibrating stance the conversation must be driven by data. These data are

used to identify gaps between expected standards and the present results, and/or to reinforce and illuminate effective practices. Clearly articulating the standards and accessing available resource materials, learning-focused supervisors define and illuminate successes and challenges. They customize the conversation by presenting models and examples of the standards in action that are content and grade level specific and explicitly name expectations. In planning for action, skillful supervisors take a developmental approach in determining achievable goals, success criteria and timelines for completion.

In learning-focused cultures, standards not only shape expectations—they raise them.



## Consulting Stance

Guiding question for the supervisor:  
“What information, ideas and technical resources will be most useful to this teacher at this time?”

Based on the teacher’s initial responses, or at some other point during the conversation, the supervisor recognizes gaps in content knowledge, student knowledge, or instructional repertoire. In some cases the teacher’s problem frame is narrow, or potentially inaccurate or the range of strategies is small. In others, there is limited understanding of factors that might be causing an issue. As a result, the supervisor determines that a shift to the consulting stance would be effective.

## Supervisory Functions

In the consulting stance, a supervisor offers perspectives on present concerns, by naming possible causes and possible approaches to improve performance. Beyond this gap analysis, a thoughtful supervisor also

shares essential information about learning and learners and curriculum and content as they relate to existing issues, principles of practice, connections to expected performance standards and relevant craft knowledge.

By offering, “Here’s what you should pay attention to” and “Here’s why that matters” and “Here are some options”, learning-focused supervisors make their thinking transparent. Here again, an approach that is customized and developmentally appropriate drives many of the supervisor’s choices. For example, in planning for action, skillful supervisors propose a menu of teacher goals to promote student achievement and professional growth, and provide opportunities for the teacher to choose and prioritize. Defining indicators of success and confirming timelines for completion are essential parts of the planning process. As teachers internalize principles of learning and teaching, these understandings become resources for more generating their own approaches and solutions.



A teacher observes a STEM lesson at Stevens Elementary (Aberdeen SD).

## Collaborating Stance

Guiding question for the supervisor:  
“What are some ways to balance my contributions with this teacher’s experiences and expertise?”

The collaborative stance creates a shared platform for the co-construction of knowledge. In this stance, both participants generate ideas, offer solutions, analyze problems. In many cases the learning-focused supervisor shifts to a collaborative stance to increase the teacher’s confidence in his or her own ability to analyze data, frame problems and develop strategies. Much like the gradual release concept in classroom practice, this developmental orientation contributes to greater ownership of the strategies and actions generated.

In this stance, the supervisor provides support for idea generation balanced with respect for the teacher’s ability to generate ideas and solutions. A rich, inquiry-driven collaboration creates permission for both parties to add ideas and perspectives without anyone dominating the conversation.

## Supervisory Functions

From the collaborative stance, the supervisor and teacher jointly clarify standards to ensure shared understanding. Together, they analyze data

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to identify a level of performance, identifying gaps between standard-driven expectations and current practice. In partnership, they generate potential causal theories, establish goals for growth, develop plans and produce strategies for action. Shared perspectives lead to greater insights for both teacher and supervisor.

Each stance is in large part defined by which participant in the conversation is producing the information and/or analysis at a given moment. The collaborative stance has the widest range of participation. In this stance, both parties are contributing. In some cases, the supervisor leans more towards consulting by suggesting criteria or offering a principle of practice upon which to base ideas. In others, the supervisor might lead with a completely open-ended inquiry, and the collaboration has more of a coaching quality.

## Coaching Stance

Guiding question for the supervisor: "What mental and emotional resources might be most useful for this teacher at this time?"

The coaching stance assumes that the teacher has the resources necessary to engage in data-centered reflection

The coaching stance communicates high expectations and high regard for teachers' capacities. For this reason, one key principal of practice is to enter the conversation from a coaching stance with an initial inquiry and close the conversation in that stance, as well, to identify new learning and clarify next steps.

Supervisory exchanges must offer opportunities to think, reflect and problem-solve within the flow of the real work of learning to teach.

on practice and modify and manage personal learning. Operating from this stance, the supervisor respectfully invites the teacher to draw upon his or her experience and lead in the construction of new ideas, problem frames, growth oriented goals and action plans.

## Supervisory Functions

In the coaching stance, the supervisor references teaching and learning standards and a variety of data as focal points for the conversation. The supervisor inquires into the teacher's thinking about each of these resources to identify levels of performance. In this stance, the teacher is the primary source of problem frames, gap analysis, potential solutions and strategies. Through an inquiry process, the supervisor's role is to enhance teacher's capacities for planning, reflecting, problem solving and decision-making.

The coaching stance is one of inquiry. This means that there are multiple appropriate responses, and that the supervisor has not predetermined a correct answer.

The value of these questions is that they influence the teacher's underlying thought processes. By inquiring, pausing, and probing for details as data are explored, the supervisor supports both idea production and the exploration of the "whys" and "hows" of choices, possibilities, and connections.

This nonjudgmental approach applied over time, enlarges the frame, developing the teacher's ever-increasing capacity for expert thinking and practice. The ultimate aim of the coaching stance is to develop a teacher's internal resources for self-coaching so that



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A teacher works with a student at Browns Point Elementary (Tacoma PS).

with time and practice, an increasingly sophisticated inner voice guides professional self-talk. In planning for action, supervisor questions guide the teacher's exploration of goals, success criteria and reasonable timelines for action.

## Creating a Learning Culture

A developmental and customized approach requires that supervisors consider which data are collected and shared, which aspects of specific standards drive the learning and how frequently they engage with their teachers. In addition, flexible supervi-

sors navigate strategically across the continuum, choosing the most appropriate stances for promoting a teacher's growth. This flexibility is another aspect of customization in learning-focused conversations. The ability to continually anticipate, monitor and flex stance across the Continuum of Interaction is a vital component in developing and maintaining learning-focused supervisory relationships.

If the goal is to increase teachers' capacities for self-direction, supervisory exchanges must offer opportunities to think, reflect and problem-solve within the flow of the real work of learning to teach.

Given the changing context that surrounds schools, it is essential that the first line support system for teachers is one that nurtures their growth and development as individual practitioners and as collaborative colleagues.

The test of supervisors' effectiveness is the degree of influence that their behavior has on teachers' commitment

to their own growth: their knowledge and skill, improvements in classroom practice and the level of engagement and success for students. As the actions of individual teachers combine with the actions of their colleagues, a school's learning culture emerges.

Shaping this learning culture is the prime work of instructional leaders. Learning-focused supervision is an effective and necessary vehicle for doing so. ■

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